

Rota? It's a small world

by John Morton

What does Rota, a 30-square mile island in the tropical South Pacific, have to do with the Kenai Peninsula? Not much at first glance. Rota is in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. protectorate much like the Virgin Islands or Puerto Rico. It's much closer to the Philippines than it is to any of the 50 states. About 3,000 people live on Rota, mostly Chamorros, the indigenous people who settled there a thousand years before Christ was born.

The Spanish colonized the Marianas in the late 17th century; as did the Russians begin colonizing the Aleutians and coastal Alaska 50 years later. When the Klondike gold rush was in full swing, the Spanish sold Rota to the Germans to pay for the Spanish-American War of 1898. About the time that Anchorage was founded during WWI, the Germans gave up Rota to the Japanese, who rapidly developed the island during the three decades prior to WWII.

By 1935 there were 6,000 residents on Rota, and the main village of Songsong had paved streets, electric lights, telephones, automobiles, and trolley cars! A vertical tram transported mined phosphate from the mountains down to the processing plant on the coast, and a train hauled sugarcane from the northern plateau to the southern port. At the same time back in Alaska, Anchorage had fewer than 4,000 residents, there may have been as many as two million caribou in the state, the Matanuska Valley was just being homesteaded, and the Kenai National Moose Range had yet to be established by Franklin Roosevelt. The rest of the U.S. was living in the Great Depression.

Towards the end of WWII, not long after the 11th Air Force dropped 27,000 pounds of ordinance on the Aleutian islands of Kiska and Attu in preparation for a U.S. invasion, Rota was overlooked in the hurry to get to Japan. Because Rota never endured the ferocious tank battles and destructive shelling that occurred on many other Pacific islands, it is one of the most beautiful islands in Micronesia today, with native limestone forest intact over much of the island.

Hard to believe that Rota has been a part of the U.S. for 60 years! I doubt that most of you have ever heard of it. And yet the same Endangered Species Act that protects Short-tailed Albatrosses, Spectacled Ei-

ders and the Aleutian Shield Fern in Alaska, is the same federal law that protects Mariana Crows on Rota. Mariana Crows exist only on Rota and Guam, another island in the Marianas, and nowhere else in the world. However, it no longer breeds on Guam because of predation by Brown Tree Snakes, a species that was accidentally introduced from the Admiralty Islands when Guam was used as a repository for salvaged military equipment after WWII. To make matters worse, the Rota population has declined 60% since 1982, to fewer than 400 crows when last surveyed in 1998.

I was part of that island-wide survey in 1998 as a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist. I had studied Mariana Crows on both Guam and Rota for the better part of six years. I returned to Rota for two weeks this past November to help re-survey Mariana Crows. Counting birds seems simple enough, but you have to realize that this is real tropical jungle. The kind of place that Tarzan would call home. Hot, humid jungle close to the equator with enveloping vines that can be so thick that you literally cut tunnels through them with a machete. And the island was formed by periodic tectonic activity that shoved coral reefs above the water in concentric circles, so the island rises like a tiered wedding cake 1,500 feet above the ocean. For those of you that have snorkeled or dove over coral reefs, you know how jagged they can be. Try walking on them.

Much of the pleasure for me was seeing crows that I had color banded as nestlings several years ago now producing young of their own. Mariana crows have phenomenal site tenacity, much like our own Bald Eagles on the Kenai Refuge. They defend the same territory year after year, occasionally nesting in the same tree where they lay one to four eggs. I and several other dedicated biologists followed 30 pairs six days a week for three years running. 'Dedicated' might be an understatement. 'Fanatical' comes to mind.

So why has the crow population on Rota declined? Introduced predators like Monitor Lizards and rats are reducing nest success, much like Norway rats have decimated bird populations in some of the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands. Aggression by Drongos, a Southeast Asian flycatching bird that the Japanese intro-

duced to eat agricultural insects, may be interfering with normal crow behavior, in much the same way that European starlings have affected some native birds in the lower 48. Global climate change appears to be increasing the frequency and magnitude of typhoons, much like Ed Berg has suggested that climate change has increased Spruce Bark Beetle activity and the drying of wetlands on the Kenai. Clearing forests for golf courses and agricultural homesteads has reduced crow habitat, much like urban and residential development on the Kenai has carved into brown bear habitat. In more recent years, Mariana Crows have been persecuted because some locals believe they hinder economic development. I can't think of a similar counterpart in Alaska, but certainly Spotted Owls in

northern California come to mind.

So Rota and the Kenai do share similar wildlife issues, although they involve unique species and different cultural perspectives. The moral of the story is that you can run, but you can't hide. Whether you live in America's last frontier in the Far North or on a tropical outpost in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, it is a very small and shrinking world. A good New Year's resolution might be to enjoy our natural world, as many of us already do, but don't forget to appreciate it.

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